

Unit 8: Nuances of Thought

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Importance of family vs. individual obligations in Arab circles
- Arab perspectives toward suppositions, qualifying and probabilities
- Preference for the particular rather than universal rule in much of Arab practice
- Importance of context--time "frame"--for presenting ideas and learning to Arab audiences

Identify

- Color symbolism for Arab peoples
- Deductive and inductive reasoning
- Supposition

Realize

- Preference of many Arab peoples to respond affirmatively to inquiries
- Alien concept of "volunteerism" in many Middle East circles
- Value of aesthetic pursuits in much of Arab culture

Unit 8: Nuances of Thought

1. Saying "NO" Somewhat related to the emphasis on friendship and duty to friends is the attitude toward saying "no."



If one person asks another for a favor, a huge percentage of the time, the answer will be "yes," even if the person asked is not at all sure that he can do the favor. Although this can be quite maddening to those of us who are used to "yes" meaning "yes" and "no" meaning "no," both parties to the interaction in the Middle East really prefer the answer to be "yes," no matter what.

It was explained that even if the person you asked for help is, in the end, unable to give it, you at least want him to indicate that he will try to do what you asked. This spares both parties any immediate embarrassment.

2. Arab Symbolism The color blue is associated with magical powers and is thought to have the power to ward off the evil eye. Persons with blue eyes, however, are also believed to have the power to employ the evil eye. The left hand is also considered evil or at least an instrument of evil. Green is the holy color of Islam. (NOTE: THE SAUDI FLAG IS GREEN) Moslems attach special significance to the number five. It is used to represent the Five Pillars of Islam or the five fingers of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. The mustache is a symbol of a man's virility or masculinity. The beard symbolizes a man's integrity.

3. Individualism The early religious influences of American fundamentalist groups has spread into the general lifestyle. The belief "God helps those who help themselves," and judges man by what he does rather than what he says, is

today shown in the American tendency to see people as individuals who can act alone, if necessary, and who decide for themselves what their life will be.

Few people in the world see people as apart from their families and others as Americans do, including Arabs. As an arm belongs to a body, so a person belongs to the family. The family head makes decisions--children, students, wives, and those of lower status are directed and controlled by those who are older and wiser. Family obligations take precedence over individual wishes.



American: "Our trainees can then select their specialty..."

Arab: "The trainees would choose!"

American: "I decided to join the military when I was..."

Arab: "Then it was expected of you by your family?"

American: "Our instructors then encourage the students to express their own ideas."

Arab: "They do not let the students have the instructor's ideas? How can students have ideas?"

American: "I have two children. One wishes to be an engineer, the other an artist."

Arab: "They will not do as you wish them to do?"

4. Volunteering A concept taught to American children. To give without obligation or pay for a cause or group, or to give as a community obligation rather than kinship one.



Nearly all Arabs do things for their kinfolk who are insurance in life, or when asked (ordered). To do something not for either family obligations or pay is an alien idea.

American: "Can you suggest some volunteer work my wife could do?"

Arab: "She is looking for work, you say?"

American: "Some of the men would like to do volunteer work for the community."
Arab: "Oh, they have been asked to help?"
American: "But the village people will have to help with some of the work."
Arab: "They do good work, yes. They will be happy you bring them work." (and pay)
American: "Would some of the men be willing to come out and help us in their free time?"
Arab: "Oh, yes. They will be happy to work for you. They always need money."
American: "I was thinking that some of the instructors might give time to teach night classes to the villagers."
Arab: "But the Ministry of Defense cannot pay them for this work."

5. Self-Help

Americans tend to think the concept of self-help is self-evident. The concept has no meaning in much of the Arab world. In the Arab world, "self-help" assumes the individual can act alone.



American: "We need some of your people to help themselves...do the work for themselves."
Arab: "They do the work for the government, to make the plan work. But they must be paid!"
American: "The people can do it themselves..."
Arab: "But it is a military project. Why should they?"
American: "If the pilots would do the ready-room as a self-help project for themselves..."
Arab: "Doing this work is helping themselves? Is flying a plane also helping themselves?"

6. Unpleasant Thoughts

Americans tend to readily think of unpleasant and even catastrophic consequences, believing there is no cause and effect. It is considered superstitious to remark, "Don't even say that! Knock on wood!"



Some psychologists, however, believe the thought can father the event; similar to religious beliefs that an evil thought is equal to a deed. Most Arabs are convinced that a thought won't provoke or create an event. When a negative idea is expressed, it is often followed by a denial of that possibility or with something like "God forbid it!"

American: "If anything should happen to the Commander, you'll need a backup."

Arab: "No, no. That must not happen. The Commander will be fine."

American: "We must teach them to repair it, so when it breaks down they will know how to do it."

Arab: "You have done a good job. It is well made. No breakdowns will happen."

American: "My idea is to have a base dispensary in case of accidents or epidemics."

Arab: "There will be no accidents. No epidemics."

7. Suppositions Americans tend to "suppose" answers to questions and situations. At times these suppositions can be quite absurd in explaining an idea.

Many Arabs are very realistic and do not consider improbabilities or non-guarantees as possibilities.



American: "Suppose you were the enemy general. What would you do next?"

Arab: "Oh...Who can say?"

American: "Suppose you had no way of knowing a man's test scores. How would you select him?"

Arab: "But we have their scores here in our office, yes."

American: "What would you do in my place?"

Arab: "What will I do? But I am not in your place."

American: "Suppose you could write the Minister of Defense. What would you ask for?"

Arab: "As you know, sir, I would not write to the Minister, himself."

8. Quantifying

Americans love to express many ideas in numbers that don't really require quantification. Close to all Arabs do not use numbers where they are not directly relevant. Numbers and quantifying are used in math problems.



American: "My home is the sixth largest in the States. It has hundreds of miles of freeways. Sixty percent."

Arab: "It is a big city."

American: "He'll only be visiting for 48 hours."

Arab: "Oh! Perhaps he will like to stay longer."

American: "There are three projects the squadron can start on. First we want to see...then we'll visit bases for two weeks covering about 80% of the units in this area."

Arab: "You will be traveling, and will see our bases, yes."

9. Probability

Americans tend to express ideas in terms of probability. A large percentage of Arabs see events as either happening or not happening.

American: "The more applicants the better our chances of getting qualified people."

Arab: "When you ask for good men, good men will come."

American: "The odds are that it..."

Arab: "Odds?"

American: "It would increase our chances of doing it..."

Arab: "Increase chances, you say?"

American: "There's little chance we can begin training before November."

Arab: "You say there will be no training for our people?"

American: "If they do this, it's less likely there will be an accident."

Arab: "Less likely, you say? Less likely?"

10. Usefulness

Americans tend to value the practical or "useful" parts of an experience or event over the aesthetic, both in ideas and things, while many Arabs value the aesthetic equally, sometimes more than, the usefulness of an idea or thing.



American: "Our library has a good film file, many books, and there are classes. Have you seen it?"

Arab: "It is a beautiful building. Very pleasant."

American: "If we cut down some of the trees, we can put the runway straight through. Do it fast."

Arab: "You say cut down trees? These are old trees."

American: "It would be more practical to put the building..."

Arab: "That would look nice."



11. Universal Rules vs. Particular

Americans tend to react to universal rules, broad obligations, and procedures. Overseas they often insist on following rules and regulations as a matter of professionalism and personal integrity. Misunderstanding occurs when the local host expects them to live up to particular obligations, say, friendship, when it means violating a rule. The American sees breaking rules as "improper" and reflecting unfavorably on the host's character.

Many Arabs tend to react to the particular situation over the general one. They are guided first in a given situation by obligations of the particular relationship between oneself and the person affected by the act.

To value an abstract law or rule over a friendship is seen as cold, if not an actual betrayal of the friendship. This belief, once prevalent in Western culture when law was not fully established or equally applied, and when family was

the only insurance policy around, may be tied to kinship over others.

American: "We have an honor code at our Academy. Let me ask, if one cadet is copying from another, does the other cadet have to report him?"

Arab: "Oh, as you know, a cadet may expect the other to help him a little, yes." (Personal friendship over abstract rules).

American: "We will ask that high school graduates with English and math apply for this training."

Arab: "We will help you find good men. I will talk with my men, who know others in their families or friends' families who will do this training." (Family is more of a qualification than the impersonal).

American: "Yes, the Colonel is a good friend. His son is a good student, too. If his grades are good, he'll go to advanced training."

Arab: "Yes, yes. You will give him good grades, of course."

12. Deductive vs. Inductive

Americans learn and present ideas starting with the specific, practical examples and events, then combining them into groupings, and finishing with an overall generalization or theory.



Also, they tend to seek information about the matter. Americans can talk about one piece of a jig-saw puzzle without referring to the whole. Build piece by piece. In graduate school, which many students have difficulty transitioning to, thinking must switch to deductive approaches.

Most Arabs tend to learn and to present ideas starting with the theory, drawing generalizations, and ending by fitting events and observations into the theory or framework. They find it difficult to talk of isolated pieces without knowing the frame. They may feel that an idea explained out of context may be an attempt by the American to "put something over" or to "brainwash" someone.

American: "Two days ago there was an accident. An investigation showed a part of the..."
(Building to a Flying Safety pitch).

Arab: "Yes, yes, there was an accident." (What is he trying to tell me?)

American: "The purpose of this program is..."

Arab: "It is very interesting." (For what? What is the framework in which the program fits?)



"Practice spontaneity."

Review Quiz: Nuances of Thought

Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct answer in the blank provided.

1. ____ The _____ is often considered evil or an instrument of evil.
 - a. right foot
 - b. left hand
 - c. mustache
2. ____ Many Arabs find it difficult to talk of isolated pieces of knowledge
 - a. without knowing the frame or context.
 - b. because the desert is large and the road narrow.
 - c. because life is hard.
3. ____ The concept of _____ is alien to most of the Arab world as it assumes an individual can act alone.
 - a. frontier rights
 - b. self-help
 - c. a constitution
4. ____ In the Middle East, interactions between peoples often express the answer of _____, no matter what the question.
 - a. no
 - b. yes
 - c. whatever
5. ____ The holy color of Islam is _____.
 - a. red
 - b. blue
 - c. green
6. ____ Most Americans often express ideas in terms of _____.
 - a. happening or not happening.
 - b. probability.
 - c. the lesser of two evils.

7. _____ Most Arabs tend to be guided by a particular situation, the obligations of a personal relationship, rather than

- a. universal, broad rules and procedures.
- b. desert etiquette.
- c. obtuse, intellectual formulations.

8. _____ The color _____ is associated with magical powers and ability to ward off the evil eye.

- a. green
- b. yellow
- c. blue

9. _____ With most Middle Easterners, _____ obligations take precedence over individual concerns.

- a. employment
- b. family
- c. political

10. _____ Many Arabs value _____ qualities, sometimes more than the usefulness of an idea or thing.

- a. aesthetic
- b. military
- c. down-to-earth



"...the ability to evolve that we have demonstrated so often over our short life--to respond quickly to new strategic requirements and new technological opportunities. In the end, the most impressive story of the development of the Air Force is the story of our people's willingness, even their eagerness, to step up to change and maturation."

Honorable Sheila E. Widnall, secretary of the Air Force